

## In unified Germany, a split over the past



### [Tearing Down the Wall in 1989](#)

This November marks the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Washington Post Editor Marc Fisher, who served as The Post's Berlin correspondent in 1989, remembers the jubilation on the streets and reflects on the lasting legacy of the fall of the wall.

### [LAUNCH PHOTO GALLERY](#)

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EISENHUETTENSTADT, GERMANY -- In this fading factory town, built more than a half-century ago to honor Stalin, the former East German dictatorship still generates fond memories.

As Germans prepare to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall -- a spontaneous burst of freedom that led to the collapse of communism in Europe -- the country remains divided in its memories of the old days.

Many residents of the former East [Germany](#) resent what they say is an unfair characterization of their country as a "criminal state" by their counterparts in the west. Instead, they say, the German Democratic Republic was a well-intentioned, if flawed, experiment in socialism that denounced the evils of the Nazis.

In a survey commissioned by the federal government to assess how Germans feel today about the events of 1989, 57 percent of those in the eastern half of the country said life under communist rule was, on balance, more positive than negative.

"What people really are saying is, 'I didn't do everything wrong, I didn't live in vain,' " said Gabriele Haubold, an architect and city planner in Eisenhuettenstadt, which was founded as a model socialist city but has suffered since 1989, losing more than one-third of its population.

"People think back to how it was in the GDR, how it was different, how we had work, how there was a safety net so you didn't have to worry about things," she said. "But, of course, you also have to remember that there was a price to pay for all this."

People who held senior jobs in the former East German government or who worked for the Stasi, its notorious secret police, were prosecuted or shunned after Germany's unification in 1990. But as time has passed, such affiliations have lost some of their stigma.

In Berlin, scores of international dignitaries and thousands of others will gather Monday to commemorate [the demise of the Wall](#). The highlight will come when an order is given to topple a row of eight-foot-tall foam dominoes stretching for a mile along the old dividing line in the heart of the city.

In contrast, nothing special is planned Monday in Eisenhuettenstadt, a town of 32,000 near the Polish border.

**Burnishing memories**

Eisenhuettendorf was built starting in 1950 to house thousands of workers for giant steel mills. Intended to showcase East Germany's socialist economy, it was called Stalinstadt until 1961, when the name was changed to reflect the Soviet leader's posthumous fall from grace.

Today, the city looks like a mothballed version of a forgotten era. The workers' barracks -- boxlike monoliths that dominate the city center -- have been spruced up since unification but sit largely empty. Unemployment has hit 20 percent in recent years, and prospects for growth are few.

Andreas Ludwig, an urban historian, is one of the few west Germans who have moved here. In 1993, he opened the Documentation Center for Everyday Culture of the German Democratic Republic.

For years, Ludwig urged many locals to donate school textbooks, consumer goods, propaganda posters -- anything that could help explain the era to future generations. The museum now has 150,000 items in its collection.

Many Germans in the west accuse easterners of romanticizing communist life and forgetting the oppression, lack of freedom and economic deprivation. But Ludwig said the nostalgia is more a way to draw attention to shortcomings in unified Germany.

"When people say things were better in the GDR, the politicians get angry. They say, 'It can't be, it was a dictatorship,' " Ludwig said. "They don't realize that it's just a critique of their job."

But Klaus Schroeder, a political science professor at the Free University of Berlin, said his research has shown that even east German teenagers born since 1989 hold a sanitized view of life under communism, thanks to their parents and teachers, who gloss over the bad parts.

"It is interesting that many young people in the east want the GDR back, but it is not the real GDR that they want," Schroeder said. "Young people know very little about the real GDR. It is not taught in schools, so they craft their own version with nostalgic, positive aspects."

## Growing disillusionment

Overall, east Germans are happier with the end of communism than their neighbors behind the old Iron Curtain, according to [a poll released Monday](#) by the Pew Research Center. About 85 percent of east Germans approve of the change to market capitalism, while 82 percent favor the transition to multiparty democracy -- higher marks than in any of the eight other ex-communist countries surveyed.

At the same time, some rosy assumptions have sharply faded.

For example, 97 percent of east Germans in 1991 expected that their standards of living would match those in the west within two decades, according to a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center's forerunner, the Times Mirror Center. Today, however, only 12 percent of east Germans feel that living standards have equalized, the Pew survey found.

Wolfgang Anton, 73, a former school director from Eisenhuettenstadt, said disillusionment took root among many residents in the early 1990s, after the state-owned factories were closed or privatized.

"Many people lost a lot of their sense of self-worth," he said. "Today, those are the people who like to remember all the nice memories from the GDR, all the parades and good things."

Anton recalled how he sat glued to the television set for days in early November 1989, watching the Wall come down. "I get goose bumps every time I think about it," he said. "It was an utterly great day."

So how will he mark the 20th anniversary on Monday? He paused, then admitted he has no plans.

"For me, the anniversary is just not a particularly special day," he said. "It's good we're not in a dictatorship. And yes, I'm very happy to be in freedom. But I don't feel the need to talk about it all the time."

Special correspondent Shannon Smiley contributed to this report. #